

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ROME 003827

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SUBJECT: ITALIANS WELCOME LEAD ROLE IN EU MISSION AT RAFAH

Classified By: POL M/C David Pearce for Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary. NEA DAS Elizabeth Dibble held consultations with senior GOI officials on Middle East issues November 15. The GOI officials welcomed the recent agreement between Israel and the Palestinian Authority on reopening the Rafah crossing and noted that an Italian general would lead the EU monitoring mission at Rafah. The officials said Syria should change its behavior, but they did not want to see an internal power struggle bringing the Muslim Brotherhood to power. Dibble stressed that Syria must cooperate on Iraq, ending its support for Palestinian rejectionist groups, and Lebanon, as well as the Mehlis investigation. On Palestinian elections, the GOI officials felt Hamas had no positive agenda and was not ready to govern. Dibble said Hams must choose: violence was incompatible with participation in the political process.

End summary.

Italy to Lead EU Mission in Rafah

¶2. (SBU) NEA DAS Dibble met with PM Berlusconi Diplomatic Advisors (Francesco Talo and Marco Carnelos) and with MFA Middle East officials (Deputy Director General Luca Del Balzo, BMENA Coordinator Sergio Scarantino, Acting Office Director for the Eastern Mediterranean Luca Sorgi, and Desk Officer for Syria and Lebanon Giorgia DeParolis) in separate meetings on November 15.

¶3. (C) Dibble's visit coincided with the Secretary's announcement of an "Agreement on Movement and Access" between Israel and the Palestinian Authority. FM Fini hailed the agreement, termed it a "turning point" and welcomed the EU role. The GOI said an Italian, Italian Carabinieri General Pietro Pistolese, had been selected to lead the EU monitoring mission of the Rafah border crossing. General Pistolese is a highly respected officer who was heading the Center for Police Excellence and Stability (COESPU) in Vicenza. His appointment is a gain for the EU Rafah mission. Text of FM Fini's statement is reprinted in paragraph 15 below.

¶4. (C) Carnelos pointed out that historically Israel has not trusted the EU on security issues. Talo added that the 2003 Italian EU Presidency marked a turning point in EU-Israel relations when the EU, at Italy's prodding, designated Hamas as a terrorist organization.

Dibble: Hamas Must Choose

¶5. (C) Both the Chigi and MFA officials, noting Italian press reports on sharp disagreement between the Secretary and PM Sharon over Hamas, asked for clarification. Dibble explained that, as reflected in Quartet statements, there is an inherent contradiction between participating in a democratic process and maintaining the use of violence as a political tool. However, this is a Palestinian process and the Palestinians must decide who is eligible to participate in their elections. If Hamas officials are elected, the organization will have to choose which path it intends to take. The U.S. position is that Hamas is a terrorist organization and we will not meet with its members.

¶6. (C) Talo, citing Abu Mazen's argument during his recent visit to Washington, speculated that participation in the democratic process might induce Hamas to choose to lay down its arms in an effort to gain support. He noted, however, that Hamas was not ready to govern, since it has no positive agenda to offer on a national level, would find it easier to attack Israel from outside the government, and the Palestinians themselves recognize that a Hamas government would receive decreased international assistance.

Israeli Help with Palestinian Elections Key

¶7. (C) The MFA officials agreed that Israel needs to cooperate with the Palestinians in the upcoming elections by facilitating access to the West Bank and Gaza. Scarantino noted that, paradoxically, if Israel doesn't facilitate access in the West Bank, Hamas (which is stronger in Gaza) would reap a high percentage of the votes. Dibble said another issue was access in Jerusalem, without which the election would not be considered valid in the eyes of the Palestinians.

¶8. (C) The Chigi and MFA officials were also eager to hear Dibble's assessment of the situation in Syria. Dibble said much depended on Mehlis' upcoming report to the Security Council on Syrian cooperation with his investigation, but Syria still needs to change its behavior in terms of interference in Lebanon and Iraq and in providing support for Palestinian rejectionist groups. Carnelos commented that the ruling Alawites are in the minority and that for them changing their behavior would be perceived as a sign of weakness. This could lead to a power struggle, he said, adding that his "nightmare" was the Muslim Brotherhood taking control. Ultimately, he argued, it was more important that the Syrians change their behavior in Iraq and Lebanon than that they be punished for the Hariri assassination.

¶9. (C) Dibble countered that accountability was also important. Syria must make measurable, not cosmetic changes. The Lebanese deserved an answer on the Hariri killing, and the perpetrators needed to be brought to justice. The Syrians know what they need to do, she said, and the international community should not tolerate horse-trading. Carnelos opined that, depending on how far into the circle of ruling elite the Mehlis investigation reaches, one face-saving option for Asad would be to give up a sacrificial lamb (presumably not a member of the innermost Asad family circle) and then make changes on the other fronts.

¶10. (C) On Lebanon, Dibble reported progress on the economic front, but general nervousness about Syrian reaction to UNSCR 1636 and uncertainty regarding the future of President Lahoud in light of the Mehlis report's implications of his involvement in the Hariri assassination. Hezbollah is also still causing trouble, she added, emphasizing that U.S. officials will not meet with any of its members. (Comment. The Italian Ambassador in Lebanon did meet with Lebanese Energy Minister Fneish, a member of Hezbollah, for which FM Fini was sharply criticized by the Israelis during his November 1 visit to Israel. End comment). Scarantino responded that, unlike with Hamas, the EU had not yet taken a formal decision on designating Hezbollah as a terrorist organization, though Italy had pushed for one. Dibble said she wished to take advantage of the opportunity to urge Italy to keep pressing that the EU do so.

Forum for the Future: The Show Will Go On Without Egypt

¶11. (C) Scarantino, who did not attend the Forum for the Future in Bahrain due to illness, said it was a pity that the Forum failed to attain its main goal -- consensus on a declaration of principles -- because of Egypt. Mubarak wanted to maintain a bipolar situation pitting the government against Islamists, leaving no other political option, whereas the goal of BMENA was to help develop that middle ground. Furthermore, he added, at the Democracy Assistance Dialogue (DAD) meeting in Rabat it had already been decided, in response to Egypt's concerns, that the Foundation would not be allowed to finance political parties. Egypt's position was especially regrettable, he commented, because all of the other Arab states, including Saudi Arabia, were on board. However, he said it would be wrong to call the Forum a failure, in light of the "great work" done in the areas of education, literacy, democracy promotion, and advancing civil society, as well as the increasing involvement and more positive attitude of the Arab countries. The Foundation would go ahead without Egypt, Scarantino said.

¶12. (U) Begin text of Foreign Ministry statement on Rafah Agreement:

Minister Fini welcomes appointment of Major General Pietro Pistolese

15 November 2005 - Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs Gianfranco Fini has expressed his delight on receiving news of the appointment by the Political and Security Committee of the European Union, of Major General Pietro Pistolese, who leads the Center of Excellence for Stability Police Units, to head the European assistance mission at the Rafah border crossing between Gaza and Egypt.

Minister Fini hailed the agreement reached today between Israel and the National Palestinian Authority on the border between Gaza and Egypt, saying that it marked a very significant turning point in the ongoing peace process. The request advanced by both the Israeli and Palestinian parties for the European Union to play a third-party role in managing the border crossings had first been mooted by Israeli Prime Minister Sharon and the President of the Palestinian National Authority Abu Mazen during Minister Fini's recent visit to Israel and the Palestinian Territories. Minister Fini actively recommended the idea to the EU's High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy, Javier Solana, and to his counterparts in

the EU Member States, who debated it in the Council on 7 November last, already reaching a positive stance at that time.

End text.

¶13. (U) DAS Dibble has cleared this cable.
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